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MITO YASHIKI

A TALE OF OLD JAPAN

BEING A FEUDAL ROMANCE DESCRIPTIVE OF THE DECLINE OF
THE SHOGUNATE AND OF THE DOWNFALL OF THE
POWER OF THE TOKUGAWA FAMILY

BY

ARTHUR COLLINS MACLAY, A.M., LL.B.

AUTHOR OF "A BUDGET OF LETTERS FROM JAPAN"

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PREFACE.

IN the year 1875, when I was in the service of the Japanese government at Tokio, it chanced that my place of residence was located north of the old Yedo castle grounds, while my office lay to the south of them, thus rendering it necessary for me to pass twice each day through the centre of that vast system of feudal fortification. One stormy day, as I was trudging homeward in company with an inveterate pedestrian,—a young Englishman who persisted in taking “constitutional exercise” in all kinds of weather,—he suddenly halted at the bridge that crossed the broad moat before the Sakurada gateway and exclaimed: “Here is the spot where was enacted the most thrilling episode in modern Japanese history. On a day like this, about fourteen years ago, the *de facto* ruler of the Japanese empire was attacked at the head of this bridge, in the very midst of his guards, by a band of seventeen Mito *ronins*, and was ignominiously beheaded. For adroitness and daring I will match the deed against any found in the annals of any nation.” Being deeply interested in his graphic account of the tragedy, I eagerly read up all the narratives of the sanguinary occurrence that could be found, and came to the conclusion that the affair was worthy to be woven into the warp and woof of a romance by some novelist,—little imagining, however, that I myself would ever attempt such a work. For many years the incidents of this thrilling episode in Japanese history have lain fallow in my mind. After the cordial and flattering reception accorded to my “Bud-

get of Letters" three years ago, I began to seriously consider the matter of writing a Japanese romance based on this historic fact. While yet undecided as to what course to pursue in the premises, I happened to read in the *New York Independent* an article concerning Japanese novels, wherein the writer expressed the hope that some American author would work up this realm of romance, saying: "There is a vast stock to draw from. Judicious selections, easy to make, will be gladly received, we are sure. No small proportion of such stock is historical. When not entirely that, or when the incidents of the several tales are woven of truth and fable, facts and the wildest legends, the inlook it gives us into states of Japan's national existence, which are fast passing away, are too valuable to be neglected."

I have accordingly endeavored to picture in this tale of old Japan the workings of that wonderful system of espionage that characterized the Tokugawa dynasty of Shoguns,—a system that covered the empire like a net, and which was interwoven with innumerable incidents of the most thrilling interest. I have also depicted in mild colors the official corruption peculiar in a marked degree to the *régime* of the later Shoguns. And, finally, I have endeavored to picture the amazement and bewilderment of keen pagan intellects, strongly imbued with atheistical ideas, when brought in contact with the mighty realities of the Christian civilization of the nineteenth century. While freely availing myself of the license and the latitude accorded to the novelist, yet in historic and geographical matters I have striven to lay accurate details before the reader. Through the meshes of the assassination scene I have woven the thread of Sir Rutherford Alcock's brilliant description of that romantic event. In those portions of the book into which I have incorporated the atheistical objections of pagan intellects to Christianity I have, two or three times, found the Japanese ideas on the subject so completely covered by some expressions used in a recent magazine controversy in the United States between

Christianized intellects, that I have taken those expressions verbatim and have woven them into my text after having enclosed them within quotation marks.

In conclusion, I would state that the title Mito Yashiki means, when liberally rendered into English, "The feudal palace of the Prince of Mito"; and it is pronounced, like all Japanese words, after the Continental method,—*i* having the sound of *e*, and *a* having the broad sound. The accent should be placed on the first syllable of each word, and *o* should be long. Thus, when slowly pronounced, Mito Yashiki = Mē-tō Yāh'-shē-kě. When quickly pronounced, as it always is in ordinary conversation, Yashiki sounds as if it contained but two syllables,—thus, Yāsh'-kě.

ARTHUR C. MACLAY.

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MITO YASHIKI.

CHAPTER I.

THE NAKASHIMA FAMILY.

In the year 1853 of the Christian era, there dwelt in a little hamlet nestled in a sequestered glen at the foot of the Atago Mountains, in the western part of the province of Yamashiro, near to the city of Kioto, in the central part of Japan, an obscure family bearing the name of Nakashima. They traced their ancestry back to the eighth century of our era, to a certain *kugl*, or court noble, attached to the imperial household in Kioto. Those were days of affluence and power for the family; but as the Mikado was stripped of one prerogative after another, and as successive sources of revenue were cut off, from that time until the seventeenth century, by ambitious and unscrupulous generals, who grasped all the executive and administrative functions pertaining to his office, the imperial household was reduced to great poverty, and was obliged to cast adrift many courtiers, retainers, and descendants of ancient *kugls* through lack of means wherewith to support them. In the year 1600, Nakashima Isami, one of these *main* descendants, enlisted in the service of Tokugawa Iyeyas, and was engaged in many desperate battles under that valiant and victorious warrior, subduing factious chieftains in various parts of the realm. But during the years of profound peace that prevailed throughout the empire subsequent to the founding of the Tokugawa

dynasty of Shoguns, the art of war did not require such multitudes of followers ; and, as the Shoguns could not support all who might desire to enlist in their service, it naturally came to pass that those *samurai* who were without money or influence were compelled to resort to peaceful avocations for their livelihood.

Of this luckless number was Nakashima Toyada, one of the descendants of Nakashima Isami. Finding himself politely released from further fealty to the house of Tokugawa, and excused from all further necessity of eating the rice of his recent master, he reluctantly became *ronin*, and drifted from Yedo to Kioto about the middle of the last century. In vain did he seek to attach himself to the service, either of the Mikado or to that of some *kugé* ; for the tide of wealth and of power had set toward Yedo, and gloom and poverty had settled upon the ancient court of the empire.

Seeking in vain for some other employment that should harmonize with his notions of the dignity of a *samurai* and a patrician of the realm, he finally purchased, with what scanty funds he possessed, a small piece of land beside the frothing waters that rushed headlong from their sources in Atago-Yama, and dashed wildly through the glen among the foot-hills a few miles northwest of Kioto. There he built a modest cottage and established his family shrine. Having a thorough knowledge of the native literature, and being no tyro in the art of fencing, he derived a fair living from giving instruction in these branches to the youth of Kioto. He also had a natural talent for sketching and for painting in water-colors, and, although it was considered far beneath the dignity of a *samurai* to earn money like an artisan, yet being endowed with a fair share of good sense (which revealed no reason why the lofty notions of a class that furnished him not a grain of rice should be held precious in his sight), he deemed it best to pocket his dignity and to derive all the revenue possible from ornamenting choice fans and screens with his brush,—the beauty of the surrounding country furnishing many inspired scenes.

Thus employed, he passed the balance of his days in serene contentment. And his son, following his example, gradually accumulated sufficient funds wherewith to purchase adjoining land, and to considerably enhance the value of the estate by careful horticulture.

The present head of the family, grandson of the original settler, Nakashima Yotori by name, was an urbane gentleman of fifty winters. He lived in the old homestead, or rather upon the site of the old homestead, for the original building had been so frequently repaired that there was but little of the former material left in it.

Like all structures in Japan, it was built almost entirely of wood. The roof was tiled ; the gable ends were plastered with lime, the upper story had a balcony along its front side overlooking the garden and the stream ; and along the edge of the balcony railing was a shelf upon which was ranged a row of porcelain flower-pots of various colors and designs, containing chrysanthemums of many brilliant hues, and also containing several sprouts of a species of thick-leaved cactus of dwarfed proportions, from whose broken leaves exuded a thick oil that was used by the ladies as a pomatum for the hair, serving to keep it in shape with its gum-like tenacity. From this balcony a fine view of the glen could be obtained. Along the front and along the back of the lower story of the house, were wide verandas, whose polished floors abundantly testified to the tidiness of the worthy housewife ; and the ends of the house were neatly plastered in white in the spaces between the broad wooden uprights and the cross-beams, thus presenting a unique panelled appearance quite pleasing to the eye.

The rooms in the house were separated, not by partitions, but by *shojees* (sliding doors made of wood and paper), set loosely in grooves so as to render them easily removable in hot weather. The floors were all covered with *tatamis* (thick rush mats). A broad ladder with wide steps instead of rounds gives access to the upper story, which is fitted up in exactly the same manner as the lower one. In order to prevent the rain driving

through the house when storms chance to hurl themselves against either of its exposed sides, deep grooves were placed along the outer edges of the balconies and of the verandas into which may be slipped *ahmê* doors ("rain doors" made of light wood). At nighttime these were always brought forth from the closet at the end of each balcony and at the end of each veranda, and were slid into their respective places and bolted there, thus making the house quite dark inside, and serving not only to prevent the pouring in of sudden and violent tempests, but also to obstruct the ingress of all intruders. As a matter of course the house had neither garret nor cellar, as such appurtenances were unknown in the empire.

The road that leaves Kioto toward the northwest, after winding through temple grounds and groves of maple and cherry-trees, continues its devious course through several miles of gradually ascending country until it merges in the foot-hills of Atago-Yama where, when it reaches our hamlet, it passes beside the boxwood hedge that separates the front yard of our homestead from the highway. Through this evergreen barrier, ingress may be obtained by means of a gateway, whose heavy wooden portals stand ajar from daylight until nightfall, giving to passing travellers bright glimpses of the home-life within.

Entering the front yard, we find ourselves facing the veranda where the *O-kami-san* is busily engaged in sweeping off the dust—exemplary housewife as she is. On the right-hand side the yard is separated from that of the next-door neighbor by a hedge of hollyhock shrubbery, while on the left-hand side high copses of camellia bushes ranged together closely in a line before a closely woven bamboo fence served admirably to shut off intrusive inspection in that direction. Upon a bamboo trellis beside this fence there crept a morning-glory vine, while in the middle of the yard a grotesquely trimmed pine tree overshadowed with its spreading branches a large porcelain basin full of water, wherein gold-fishes were sporting amid the shadows cast upon the tiny waves by the clouds and leaves overhead; and copses of fragrant olea beside

the gateway and at the ends of the veranda, that filled the air with delicious perfume during the autumn months, together with clumps of flowering almonds and sweet-scented jessamines, gave forth perpetually their subtle charms, and abundantly testified to the taste and the skill of the inmates of the dwelling. A stately cherry-tree beside the wood-lined well at the end of the house seemed buoyed up with clouds of pink and white blossoms, which sprinkled the grass with showers of petals.

At the back of the house the ground was laid out in a neat garden, where were carefully cultivated long rows of radishes and leeks. A bamboo fence separated this garden from the adjoining one, and also from the girdle of underbrush that skirted the dark woods upon the steep mountain-side that sloped upwards from the fence.

The scenery surrounding the hamlet was subdued and beautiful. From the front balcony of the homestead you gazed upon the slopes down to the glittering sands of the mountain stream. Deep verdure embowered the opposite side of the glen, where cooling cascades among the ravines invited during the hot summer months throngs of pleasure-seekers from the sultry city. Numerous copses of feathery bamboo trees appeared like nodding plumes amid the darker foliage of chestnut, beech, oak and cryptomeria that screened the lairs of the wild boar and the retreats of the deer, which, during the summer and the autumn months, invaded the precincts of the hamlet and devoured more than their fair proportion of the sweet potatoes and the watermelons.

Either up or down the glen the view was circumscribed with deeply wooded hills and with towering crags, which sheltered the place so effectually from the wintry winds that orange-trees grew around the hamlet, and the sago-palm flourished beside the hedges, and the roses, camellias, and chrysanthemums bloomed out-doors in midwinter. The soft mantle of snow which, at rare intervals, descended upon the landscape, faded like a dream before the powerful rays of the midday sun. The stream was never frozen, and the plash of its waves washing the

sands against the pebbles and the boulders in its channel, filled the air with soft whisperings, which the children likened to the murmurings of vast throngs of monkeys in mighty convocation amid the secluded forests in the uplands where they dwelt.

But let us leave the balcony and inspect in detail the interior arrangements of the house, beginning with the reception room down stairs. This large room extends from the front veranda to the back veranda. As we enter it from the front yard, we have on our left hand a couple of closets in which the bedding has been stowed away for the day. A little beyond, on the same side of the room, is a space raised a few inches above the floor, allotted to the few ornamental things usually found in native houses, and which is usually the most picturesque portion of the interior ; here you will see the handsomely lacquered sword-rack ; here also is the sombre-looking lacquered chest containing the suit of armor in which Nakashima Isami fought at the battle of Sekigahara, two hundred and fifty-three years ago, and which still shows upon the massive bronze helmet the long and deep scar left by the keen sword of some powerful warrior of the League, whose routed legions were chased by the relentless Tokugawa Iyèyas far into the night, and whose fierce soldiers frequently turned and stretched low many an ardent pursuer whose heedless zeal had carried him away from the supporting body of troops into some fatal ambushade.

Above this warlike display is a shelf holding a pair of blue vases. Above this again are two brackets whereon are placed two handsomely lacquered boxes containing writing utensils, seals, and correspondence. While yet higher up, across the top of the space, are little closets where the ladies keep their best dresses and choice girdles ; each lady has but one gala suit, which will serve for many years, fearing nothing from change of style in a country where styles vary but little in a century. At each corner of this space is a ~~bar~~ composed of the trunk of a small tree, the bar¹ has not been

removed, and whose knot-holes have been polished until they shine. The charming rusticity of this place is suggestive of the primitive mode of living in primeval times, when saplings and trees propped up the thatch of ancient huts. The wall beyond the closets and the sanctum is decorated with hanging scrolls, upon which are designs of birds, flowers, and mountain scenery, and which, as the breeze plays through the room, gently flutter from the wall like trailing banners, and fall back into position, tapping it with the ivory ends of the sticks on which they are mounted.

On the opposite side of the room, sliding doors separate us from two smaller rooms: the one opening on the front veranda being used during the day as a place for sewing, smoking, and lounging, and during the night as the bedchamber of the three brothers; and that one which opens on the back veranda being used as the dining-room, and occasionally as a sleeping-room. Beyond these rooms, in a little wing attached to the other end of the house, were the kitchen and the bath-room. In the middle of the floor of each room was sunk a granite block, which had been hollowed out sufficiently to admit a few handfuls of ashes being placed therein to serve as the bed for little heaps of burning charcoal, over which the hands could be warmed in cold weather.

The household comprised the parents, three sons, one daughter, and an old man-servant whose father and grandfather had served the Nakashima family in a similar capacity. When Nakashima Toyada settled at the base of Atago-Yama, he took a fancy to a young wood-chopper who daily passed his gateway in the morning, armed with an axe and a coil of rope, on his way up to the well wooded ravines in the mountains, to gather fagots and fire-wood for the city market; and in the evening he had always noticed how cheerfully he trudged homeward, with his heavy load of wood tied upon his back; and, with that knowledge of human nature which his military experience had developed in him, he perceived in this youth qualities of faithfulness and industry